OE FORM 6000, 2/69

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
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ERIC REPORT RESUME

ERIC ACC. NO.	P.A.	PUBL. DATE	ISSUE
ED 035 792			
CH ACC. NO. AA 000 495		Mar 70	RIEJUN70

IS DOCUMENT COPYRIGHTED? YES ☐ NO ☒
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LEVEL OF AVAILABILITY I ☒ II ☐ III ☐

AUTHOR
Katz, Lilian G.

TITLE
Sentimentality in Preschool Teachers: Some Possible Interpretations.

SOURCE CODE	INSTITUTION (SOURCE)
BBB00324	ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.

SP. AG. CODE	SPONSORING AGENCY
BBB00321; FGK65995	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C., Div. of Educational Labs; Office of Economic Opportunity, Washington, D.C.

EDRS PRICE	CONTRACT NO.	GRANT NO.
0.25;0.90	OEC-3-7-070706-3118	

REPORT NO.	BUREAU NO.

AVAILABILITY

JOURNAL CITATION

DESCRIPTIVE NOTE
16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1970

DESCRIPTORS
*Teacher Characteristics; *Teacher Role; Stereotypes; *Teacher Stereotypes; *Preschool Teachers; Teacher Attitudes

IDENTIFIERS
*Sentimentality

ABSTRACT
In the course of controversies over preschool goals and methods for disadvantaged children, practices identified with professional preschool education predating Head Start have become labeled ''traditional'', and teachers associated with it are stereotyped as ''sentimental''. A cluster of teacher attributes implied by the ''sentimental'' stereotype includes belief in (a) the uniqueness, (b) the lovability, and (c) the preciousness of the young child. Roots of the belief are traceable to the romanticism of Rousseau and Freudian views of the psychosocial vulnerability of the young. The beliefs are seen also to serve functions for the teacher related to aspects of her working conditions. The functions of sentimentality are interpreted in terms of (1) confusion of role models, (2) low occupational status, and (3) over-determined responses to the young child as captive client. Hypothesized relationships between teacher attributes and working conditions are proposed. (Author)

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SENTIMENTALITY IN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS:

SOME POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education
Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois, Urbana

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association March, 1970, Minneapolis

ED 035 792

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Sentimentality in Preschool Teachers: Some Possible Interpretations

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois

The recent years of expansion in preschool education have been accompanied by intense and often bitter conflict among the educators and psychologists involved. These conflicts have been waged over the goals, the objectives, and the methods of preschool education. The total range of theoretical, social and philosophical issues which excite the parties in dispute is not under examination in this paper. Rather, the purpose of this discussion is to explore one element of the controversies, namely the alleged "sentimentality" of preschool teachers. It may be that this particular element constitutes an instance of a class of phenomena in the field of early childhood education which we might call "obstacles to the delivery of services to children, outside of money"!

The specific intention behind this discussion is to suggest that, if the alleged teacher stereotype exists, it can be seen as a set of reasonable responses to occupational requirements and conditions which demands respect and understanding.

There are numerous ways to describe the attitudinal organization of teacher groups. If we take, for example, the dichotomy used by Kerlinger and Pedhazur (1967) we can think of attitudes classified as either person-oriented or task-oriented. Figure 1 illustrates an interesting contrast of labels associated with these two orientations vis-a-vis elementary and nursery (preschool) teachers today.

Figure 1

Labels associated with two orientations to education of elementary and nursery school teachers

		Attitude Orientation	
		Person-oriented	Task-oriented
School Setting	Elementary	A. Progressive	B. Traditional
	Preschool (nursery)	C. Traditional	D. Experimental

The terms progressive and traditional as applied to the elementary school are those used by Kerlinger and Pedhazur and others. In the elementary school, progressive methods are associated with classroom practices developed by the followers of Dewey; traditional elementary school methods however, are formal classroom methods sometimes called the "chalk and talk" approach. The cells marked "C" and "D" represent recent labeling of nursery school practices. The traditional label indicated in cell "C" first appeared in 1965 (Baldwin, 1965), and has been frequently used since then, (cf. Blank and Solomon, 1969; Karnes, 1968; Stern, 1969; Weikart, 1967). In general, it refers to preschool teacher approaches and classroom practices identified with the professional preschool movement predating Head Start.

Nursery school teachers committed to those practices known as traditional have been sharply criticized for their alleged sentimentality. Borstelmann spoke of the "fragile-young mother-protective orientation of too many nursery teachers..." (1966, p. 18). This view of nursery school teachers is a constant theme in the writing of Bereiter and Engelmann.

> In general (with many exceptions) nursery school teachers are not desirable for work in the intensive preschool.... Their training has provided them with a deeply ingrained bias against 'forcing' the child in any way....(1966, p. 69).

Harsh, although less direct, criticism was also expressed by Stern:

> For a long time the field of early childhood education as represented by nursery school environments, operated under the sacrosanct cloak of a mystique. Principles and procedures were accepted on faith, and without question. It was assumed that the young child was a tender plant, needing only the sunny warmth of love and the milk of human kindness to be nourished, and that he would then unfold and flourish as a flower....(Stern, 1969, p. 1).

Similar characterizations of nursery school teachers were offered by Blank and Solomon (1969), Deutsch (in Powledge, 1968), and Weikart (1967).

The stereotype of the traditional nursery school teacher seems to imply a cluster of personal and related behavioral attributes. For the purposes of this paper let us call this cluster of attributes <u>senti-mentality</u>. The term is used here to indicate tenderness and delicacy of feeling, and sensitivity to emotional considerations rather than to practical or utilitarian ones; its use is not intended to convey disparagement. The cluster of teacher qualities seems to be comprised of belief in:

a. the <u>uniqueness</u> of each child
b. the <u>lovability</u> of all children
c. the <u>preciousness</u> of all young children

These beliefs probably occur as a system, and thus are difficult to examine separately.

Is There a Basis for the Stereotype?

It is difficult to know what proportion of nursery school teachers fit the stereotype. Although no empirical evidence in support of the allegations quoted above is offered in the texts from which they are taken, the appearance of these imputations is unlikely to be random or

accidental. Readers are cautioned, however, that it is not known to what extent the stereotype corresponds to actual classroom teachers. Indirect evidence supporting the existence of the stereotype comes from an examination of the literature written for preschool teachers. A position paper prepared by the Association for Childhood Education International, Basic Propositions for Early Childhood Education, gave serious expression to the belief system included here under the term sentimentality.

> During the beginning school years, the young child needs to be valued for what he is; his developing capacities for learning demand respect. An education primarily future-oriented neglects children as they are. (p. 11)
>
> ...undesirable pressures upon young children can only compound the burdens they already carry. The profession owes them protection. (p. 12)

The assertion that each child is unique can be found throughout much of the nonempirical literature written for preschool teachers; it appears to constitute a major ethic for leaders among preschool workers. Although the two major organizations whose activities are directed to preschool teachers (NAEYC and ACEI) have no formal codes of ethics, the State of Minnesota organization for preschool teachers, the Minnesota Preschool Education Association, adopted a code of ethics in 1968. The first of the twenty-nine statements listed in their code of ethics is: "I will accept children as they are by considering their individual differences, needs, temperaments, aptitudes, and environments." (Minnesota Preschool Education Association, mimeo, adopted, 1968.)

Hand in hand with the belief in uniqueness is the emphasis on the lovability of each child. This ethic is usually expressed in terms of acceptance. The injunction to "accept the child as he is" is a very common theme in the preschool literature.

A related belief is that the young child is precious. The term precious is used here to indicate a view of the young child as tender and vulnerable. It includes the conviction that the child's early psychosocial experiences are powerful determinants of his later personal adjustment. It is expressed in a major textbook for teachers as follows:

> The early years are particularly important because habits and attitudes formed at this time may affect many aspects of a child's later life. The guidance given the child... may determine whether the resulting habits and attitudes are good or bad, even in adult life. (Leeper et al., p. 54)

Formal content analyses of the growing nonempirical literature written for teachers would provide some interesting insights into the priorities and beliefs characteristic of preschool professionals.

Some Possible Interpretations

It is customary to trace this cluster of beliefs to the romantic view of childhood forwarded by Rousseau. In more recent history, the belief in the preciousness of the young child is traceable to interpretations of Freudian theories of development. Evelyn Weber pointed out that from the early Freudian psychoanalytic movement came the idea that the young child needed

> to experience sympathetic understanding, patient support and tenderness so that he could accept the process of socialization without becoming resentful, hostile, or overly aggressive. Guided with gentleness and wisdom, it was expected that the child would be free of the mechanisms of adjustment which foster aberrant behaviors. (1969, p. 5)

Whatever the historical origins, the persistence of the cluster of beliefs suggests that, because of contemporary pressures or forces, they continue to be functional. Let us go on to consider the problems of uniqueness, lovability and preciousness.

Critics of traditional preschool education do not deny or argue the existence of individual differences or unique patterns of growth in children. It is in their responses to such child differences that sentimental teachers and their critics appear to differ. For these teachers, the uniqueness of each child is to be valued and respected. A corollary of this belief is that children cannot be compared with each other; each child has unique patterns of growth and unique needs, etc. Furthermore, each child must be responded to as a "whole" child and cannot appropriately be evaluated in terms of one or more discrete qualities. The individual child's valued qualities are thought to be elusive and resistant to measurement.

For the critics of this belief, individual attributes and unique qualities become relevant or salient when individual differences are measured against norms and standards. But teachers know that once children are measured, some appear to be "behind", or to be ranked lower than others on a given scale. What follows from the ranking and measurement is the development of strategies which can be expected to bring children up on the scale by which they were measured.

> By the age of three or four, disadvantaged children are already seriously behind other children in the development of aptitudes....Disadvantaged children must somehow catch up in the development of these abilities. (Bereiter and Engelmann, p. 19)

The application of objective tests requires some impersonality. The teachers of the alleged stereotype resist professional postures which require detachment. Several factors could contribute to their resistance.

Role Confusion. One possible factor contributing to teachers' resistance to the application of objective standards and to the required

impersonality may be role confusion. It has been suggested that preschool teachers have had three basic role models: maternal, therapeutic and instructional (Katz, in press). Each model is thought to have characteristic emphases and prescriptions. It may be that teachers who fit the sentimental stereotype are those who define their roles (perhaps only implicitly) according to the maternal or therapeutic role models, or to a mixture of the two.

If a teacher defines her role along maternal lines, she must have emotional involvement with each child, and she must be equally accepting of each member of her classroom "family", in which case she would be acting consistently in resisting the application of universalistic standards of behavior (i.e. objective measures) to her children.

If she models herself along the lines of the psychotherapist she must accept a wider range of behavior than teachers of either the maternal or the instructional models (Parsons, 1951). The therapeutic teacher is likely to try to channel rather than reject nonconformist behavior, and to refrain from imposing standards (not limits) on children's behavior.

Thus, the confusion of role models may help to account for both the uniqueness and lovability factors in the sentimentality cluster.

Role Unclarity. It is possible, however, that confusion among the major role models is less central an explanation for the stereotype than is the lack of clarity of role definition. As Wilson has pointed out, unclear roles

> are likely to embody internal role-conflicts because of the absence of clear lines of demarcation whereby the role-player knows when he has 'done his job'. (Wilson, 1962, p. 27)

In such a case, teachers might be struggling with a need to be all things to all children, and thus take on the appearance of being all-accepting.

An example of the importance of love and acceptance in preschool education can be found in one of the basic preschool texts, The Years Before School: Guiding Preschool Children, by Todd & Heffernan (1964).

> The teacher in the preschool group, like the mother in the home, is the person responsible for creating an atmosphere of love...(p. 18. See also Schulman, 1967)

Furthermore, it may be that unclear role definition and the absence of criteria by which the teacher knows whether she has done her job causes her to be dependent upon her immature clients for evaluative feedback. In such a case, she is likely to place great stock in their apparent enjoyment in the activities she provides, and perhaps also in their expressions of affection for her. No studies clarifying this aspect of teacher behavior have been found.

Occupational Status. The belief in the preciousness of the young child may serve teachers' needs to see themselves as participants in crucial events. There is general agreement among workers in the field of early education that the preschool years constitute the child's most malleable period, when change can most easily occur. But "change" is a neutral term; it can be both positive and negative. If the age is a critical period for unleashing potential, it is also a period for thwarting or destroying it. The strength of the lovability and preciousness beliefs may elevate the status of the teacher in her own eyes and in the eyes of others.

The validity of this interpretation could be examined by comparing the strength of these beliefs in those teachers working in preschool settings which vary in status or prestige. It could be hypothesized, for example, that teachers in university laboratory schools (high status) would give lower rating to the preciousness factor than teachers in day

care centers (low status). This hypothesis is not very convincing; experience with workers in the field suggests that several variables other than the status of the work setting would have to be considered. For example, the type, extent, and location of the teachers' and directors' training, and variations in membership/reference group orientations are potentially influential variables associated with the preciousness factor. No data have been found with which to test this hypothesis.

A more plausible interpretation, however, is that the function of the preciousness factor is to help teachers to constrain themselves against taking undue advantage of a client who is young and who is therefore both dependent and vulnerable. In this sense, sentimentality can be seen as a functional adaptation to given aspects and hazards of her occupation.

Beliefs as Values

Another point of entry into this problem may be made by referring to the beliefs of the sentimentality cluster also as values. Let it be assumed for the moment that the expressed hierarchy of values of any given group (in this case an occupational group) reflects more or less directly the temptations inherent in its collective endeavors (i.e. occupation) against which it must beware. That is to say that if we inspect the hierarchy of values of any given group, we can discern the temptations with which the group is attempting to cope.

If this values/temptation relationship is valid, then a ranking of the values of preschool teachers could provide an indication of the temptations they must resist. Judging by the literature prepared for teachers, some of which has been mentioned briefly above, it is likely that

such values as "the uniqueness of the individual", "accepting the child as he is", "respecting the whole child", etc., would be ranked high in the hierarchy. The values/temptation relationship implies that the daily life of the teacher would be greatly simplified, for example, by regimentation of classroom procedures, by the rejection of intractable children, or by restricting her responsibilities to a limited range of the child's needs. If the teacher's role model is a psychotherapeutic one, then she may feel great ethical pressure to perceive all children as lovable. A psychotherapist may decline treatment of an individual case, but a teacher generally feels compelled to be accepting of all children in her class. Furthermore, a psychotherapist is likely to treat children one at a time, perhaps one or two hours per week. The teacher must work daily with groups of children. Thus the temptation to reject individual children must be considered a typical occupational problem.

Such temptations are undoubtedly shared by elementary school teachers, but preschool teachers are generally not working in formal bureaucratized settings like most elementary schools. They often work in isolation, with few opportunities to interact with other teachers.

What may be even more consequential than the preschool teachers' relative aloneness is the age or the relative immaturity of her clients. The clients are not only young and precious, they are also captive and at her mercy. Their immaturity renders them relatively powerless to modify her role performance. They cannot protect themselves from regimentation and rejection. Thus the teacher as an individual, and as a member of professional and colleague organizations, must reinforce her own self-constraint against abusing her power over young children.

Seen in this light, sentimentality can be thought of as an adaptation to particular hazards associated with the occupation. Support for this interpretation of sentimentality could be gained if there were studies comparing the value hierarchies of workers in early childhood education whose responsibilities vary in terms of their distance from the classroom. It might be hypothesized, for example, that the greater the distance from day-to-day responsibility for children in the classroom, the lower the professional group would rank those values logically related to the need for self-constraint and protection of the child from adult power. Thus basic research workers, evaluators and psychometricians would rank the value "accept the child as he is" lower than would the professor of education, who would rank this value lower in the hierarchy than would the head teacher of a nursery school, or a director of a child care center, who in turn would place this value lower than would the classroom teacher who must work with the young child every day in the classroom. Again, variables in training and reference group probably need consideration.

The attributes of the sentimental stereotype, if indeed such stereotypic teachers exist, apply mainly to practicing teachers and their professional leaders. While a teacher's educational objectives may be stated in terms of developmental achievements, e.g. language development, social skills, etc., the nature of her work requires her to attend to many objectives more immediate than the child's language or social skills. She must concern herself with his safety and his health; she must ensure that he is adequately dressed for outdoors, that wet clothes are changed, that injuries are assuaged, that rest is available, and that the communicable diseases of infancy are understood. These are some of the responsibilities linked to the day-to-day needs of immature children, independent of

official pronouncements of curriculum objectives. Such responsibilities may be categorized by some as the mere "nitty-gritty" of preschool education, but they are daily realities to the classroom teacher. Thus, what appears to psychologists and educational researchers to be emotionality and delicacy of feeling, e.g. sentimentality, may reflect concerns which are immediate and omnipresent to teachers, but remote for the psychologists and educational researchers to be emotionality and delicacy of feeling, i.e. sentimentality, may reflect concerns which are immediate and omnipresent to teachers, but remote for the psychologists and educational researchers.

Summary

In the brief arguments presented above, I have attempted to show that some workers in early childhood education seem to have a stereotypic view of traditional nursery school teachers, which view I have labeled sentimental.

The first question raised by this view is: is there a basis for the stereotype? Some support was found from the nonempirical literature of the field. However, no empirical data are available. If no solid basis can be found for the stereotype, then we can raise questions about the possible functions the stereotype might have for the stereotypist!

The second question is: what are the sources of such alleged sentimentality? If, the beliefs are adaptive to such problems as role confusion, lack of role clarity, or other aspects of the teacher's working conditions, then strategies for changing such teachers' beliefs (for those who would wish to do so) must take the adaptive function into proper account. They are beliefs which merit understanding and respect.

It is interesting to note that preschool teachers have been the subjects of very little disciplined inquiry. They have been completely neglected by sociologists of education, although preschool teachers' social and educational roles encompass many of the problems of interest to them.

It is hoped that the exploratory notions presented here will engage others in the search for insight and understanding of the forces and pressures in the field.

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